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COURSE ESSAY
"ENGAGEMENT AND ENLARGEMENT: WHY NOT CUBA?"

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BACKGROUND/SUMMARY

Since his consolidation of power following the 1959 Cuban revolution, Fidel Castro has been the focal point of a consistently hostile U.S. foreign policy. Any opportunities for rapprochement evaporated once Castro openly embraced Communism in 1961 (having declared to Members of the U.S. Congress during an April 1959 visit to Washington that he had no such intentions) and the relationship became a permanent building block in the Cold War edifice. That Cuba was located only 90 miles from Key West served to magnify far beyond its relative size or military might its importance in this ideological struggle and inspired a resurgence in American passion for Monroe Doctrine principles.

In the first half of the 1960's, the flight of hundreds of thousands of the Cuban elite to the United States - primarily South Florida - served as a tangible manifestation of the travesty unfolding in Cuba and served to lend popular support to the argument that what was happening in Cuba was entirely negative. If the situation could not be reversed inside Cuba (and attempts were subsequently launched by exile groups from the U.S. with tacit USG approval to accomplish this goal), it was absolutely necessary to prevent any more "Cubas" in the region. Once solidly in power and allied with the USSR, Castro did, of course, seek to "spread the good news" about Communism both in the region and internationally, thus providing the U.S. with another strong reason to seek his removal from the scene. The attempt by the USSR to install nuclear missiles in Cuba in 1962, thereby upsetting the strategic balance, contributed further to the U.S. view that Cuba - and Castro specifically - constituted a major problem for the U.S. Passage of the subtly-titled "Trading With the Enemy Act" in that same year served to remove any residual doubt that the U.S. had been provoked and was more inclined to act against, than talk with, its island neighbor to the south.

Much has changed in the world during the last 35 years. The USSR has dissolved and its component parts have neither the means nor the inclination to prop up former surrogates and

"fellow travelers" around the globe. The Cuban revolution - while earlier having achieved some notable success domestically in improving the educational and health conditions of its citizens - has been proven to be an utter failure economically and incapable of surviving in its pure form without substantial financial assistance from powerful benefactors or investment by foreign capitalists. Unwilling to commit his nation to total economic destruction, Castro has in recent years reluctantly made the ideological accommodations necessary to deal with foreign investors from capitalist countries in the region as well as Europe and Asia.

Given these changes and the fact that the title of the principle document outlining the current parameters of U.S. policies and approaches to the nations of the world is "A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement" (February 1996), it might be assumed that the 35 year-old U.S. policy toward Cuba would be undergoing significant adjustments. It could also be reasonably assumed that, given the fact of Cuba's "lone ranger" status in the lineup of democratic nations in the Western Hemisphere, there might be particular emphasis placed in this document on outlining how the world's sole remaining superpower intends to relate to its sole recalcitrant neighbor in the interests of improved regional stability and prosperity.

A reading of this basic policy document, however, reveals that the United States - even before the shooting down of the two "Brothers to the Rescue" planes in February 1996 - had few concrete plans for altering its approach of isolating Cuba while awaiting the eventual demise of Fidel Castro. In a 45 page document, there are 16 lines which deal with the subject of Cuba. 1 After its publication and the subsequent downing of the planes in international airspace, the Administration reversed its position and supported passage of the Helms-Burton Act. This legislation seeks to punish nationals of other countries for investing in Cuba through banning their admission to the U.S. and allowing U.S. citizens and residents to sue in U.S. courts for once-owned properties confiscated during the revolution and now being used by these foreign businesses. As was reported in the Washington Post on March 15, eleven executives of Sherritt International Corporation, a Canadian mining firm, have been denied U.S. visas as a result of

Sherritt's recent \$500 million investment in Cuba. 2

Perhaps more importantly, the law codifies in statute the U.S. trade embargo that has up to now been enforced by Executive Order. Given the traditional neuralgia afflicting U.S. politicians regarding associating themselves with any proposed change to "soften" our stance on Castro for fear of a Cuban-American backlash, this practically ensures that achieving adjustments in our basic attitude toward Cuba will be extraordinarily difficult to achieve as long as Castro or anyone resembling him remains in power.

As the unraveling of the USSR was occurring, causing a diminution in the threat to the United States and limitations on Cuba's ability to export revolution elsewhere, U.S. Cuba policy came under greater scrutiny and seemed increasingly out of step with the new global realities. The principal threat Cuba posed to the U.S. lay in its ability to unleash a human tidal wave across the Straits of Florida. As he is wont to do, Castro chose a moment in the summer of 1994 when the U.S. was otherwise preoccupied with Haiti (the political situation as well as another mass migration) to remind us that, when pressed, he was prepared to again relieve internal pressure on the island by playing the migration card.

The situation brought about by the Helms-Burton Act, however, poses a far more difficult set of problems for the United States in terms of dealing with current and future problems in Cuba as well as maintaining U.S. credibility and leadership internationally. The consequences of U.S. reluctance to extend our global policy of "Engagement and Enlargement" to Cuba in the past have now - with the passage of Helms-Burton - increased the costs to maintaining our newly-enhanced, long-standing and essentially unsuccessful policy of isolating Cuba as a means to bring about democratic change. In addition, the longer this situation continues, the lesser the chances for any significant U.S. (non-military) influence over the process of change in Cuba, when that change inevitably does come.

There is little doubt that concern over offending what is perceived to be a powerful

domestic lobby has guided U.S. policy makers for some time and led to virtual policy paralysis. Within the Department of State - where one would expect to find the strongest proponents of "engagement" at work given that it is the essence of the diplomatic instrument - Cuba policy has long been viewed as the "third rail" of U.S. foreign policy. Precious few diplomats have dared to suggest modifications in our approach and the careers of those who have been so bold have been derailed for having provoked certain leaders of the Cuban-American community. It is a measure of considerable power when politicians do not even wish to probe how deep support for the status quo and resistance to change might be within a domestic constituency. For although there have been dissonant Cuban-American voices regarding the efficacy of existing policy to say nothing of growing antipathy toward it among the foreign policy community, little has been done in either the Bush or Clinton Administrations to open this subject. In a February 27, 1997 Op-Ed piece in the Washington Post entitled "Our Cuban Obsession", William Raspberry calls into question the serious threat to our national trade interests that continuation of this "one-note" policy threatens. 3

At this juncture, it is extremely important that an honest and open public debate on this issue should take place. It is, after all, not "ends" that are at issue since most would agree that bringing about democratic change in Cuba is what should happen - sooner rather than later. Rather, the discussion must center on the "means" used to accomplish the desired ends. Given the political upheaval that has occurred in the world over the past decade, it is not difficult to find examples of how change in the direction of political and economic liberalization have taken place. Many of these examples would suggest that the effect of the U S. policy of isolating Cuba might actually be to retard this process by providing Castro the excuse of the embargo to explain away the monumental economic failures of the Communist system. The following is an analysis of the most significant among the many costs to larger U.S. interests of the existing "means" or what essentially has been a policy of "non-engagement and non-enlargement".

COST TO AMERICAN CREDIBILITY AND LEADERSHIP

...after thirty-five years of embargoes and hostility, it is Washington, not Havana, that is isolated on the overall issue of Cuba. 4

The vote in the United Nations General Assembly against the U.S. embargo in November 1995 was 117 to 3; in 1994 it was 101 to 2. The only countries voting with the United States were Israel and Uzbekistan. Both of these countries trade with Cuba. From the standpoint of maintaining its position of global leadership, continuation of the embargo against Cuba is costing much in terms of U.S. credibility and is, therefore, contrary to U.S. interests. In order for any country to exercise effective leadership, others must agree sufficiently with the substance of, and approach to, a particular issue to be willing to follow. With regard to the embargo against Cuba, the level of international discomfort has been significant for many years and overwhelming since the end of the Cold War. When virtually every other country in the world believes that they have more to lose by following the U.S. lead on Cuba than to gain by pleasing the most powerful nation on earth, a clear signal is being sent about the merits of the U.S. case. Since there is sufficient safety in numbers, there is little downside to opposing the U.S. on this issue.

In the Western Hemisphere, while the countries of the region have gone along with U.S. opposition to including Cuba in certain gatherings such as the Miami Summit of the Americas in 1994 and have agreed to exclude Cuba at the follow-on meeting in Santiago in 1998, they have joined with the European Union (EU), Canada and other major U.S. trading partners to oppose the Helms-Burton Act in every way possible. Including or excluding Castro in a multilateral gathering is not worth fighting with the United States about. The U.S. embargo against trade with Cuba has been universally ignored for some time with few consequences. However, these countries understand that

their own vital economic interests are being challenged when the U.S. tries to dictate where they may not invest and with whom they may not trade, without risking consequences in their relationship with a significant, albeit no longer dominant trading partner.

The fact that the United States is being challenged on Helms-Burton by the EU in the World Trade Organization (WTO) is particularly unfortunate given the effort this country expended on establishing this important institution in support of free trade. The U.S. puts itself forward as a great proponent and guardian of free trade and has many trade issues of its own that would likely benefit - at some point - from consideration by an international body such as the WTO. However, when in November 1996 the EU challenged Helms-Burton in the new court of world trade, the U.S. claimed that the three-member panel convened to examine the legality of the Helms-Burton sanctions "has no competency to proceed." Washington would not support the inquiry, won't offer a defense and (presumably) won't consider itself bound by the panel's conclusions. This position is unlikely to have the effect of strengthening an institution that the United States had clearly hoped would serve its own interests in defusing bilateral tensions arising out of trade disputes. 5

COST TO U.S. BUSINESS INTERESTS AND AMERICAN PROSPERITY

The people of Cuba are the greatest in the world. I'd like to help them rebuild the country and return it to its original splendor. And as soon as the law changes, I am ready to build the Taj Mahal in Havana.
Donald Trump 6

When all the walls come down, they'll discover their foreign competitors are already there. Theodore C. Sorenson 7

Isn't there something between dancing with a dictator and sitting passively by while the Europeans invest? We're corporate America. Why aren't we calling the shots? Lloyd Benson 8

American business is clearly concerned over developments in the U.S. - Cuba relationship. Even before passage of Helms-Burton, American business leaders were voicing concern that the U.S. would be left in the dust in terms of establishing markets in Cuba as a result of the 35 year old embargo. In 1995, Cuban economic officials met with over 1,300 U.S. executives and signed some 40 non-binding letters of intent to do business, including several million-dollar-plus commitments. But, while American products - including Coca Cola and American wines - make their way into Cuba via unauthorized distribution networks in Panama and elsewhere, U.S. business is now more than ever proscribed from operating in Cuba. 9

The U.S. business community has been a force for democratic change in other countries in the past, but in the case of Cuba, the perceived negative reaction of the Cuban exile community has driven policy further in the direction of stifling trade between the two countries. (On this point it is particularly ironic that the chief violators of the embargo are the thousands of Cuban-Americans who regularly send dollars in excess of the amount allowed to family members remaining in Cuba. While life in Cuba remains very difficult, pressure on the regime has been ameliorated as a result of these remittances from those allegedly most in favor of continuation of the embargo) In 1989, the former Soviet Union - the patron state of Castro's Cuba - imported more goods from the United States than from all other countries of the world save two - East Germany and Romania. Likewise in that year, the United States was China's third largest source of imports as well as the third-ranking purchaser of Chinese exports. 10

As a result of these and other experiences with Communist states in transition, most observers believe that increased interactions with American business and other free market representatives have had the effect of not only improving the economic situation of the countries in question but leading to an acceleration in the process of democratization. Why this sequence of events would not be expected to be repeated in

Cuba is unclear and, at this point in history, somewhat counter-intuitive. The fact that Castro himself has only reluctantly accepted foreign investment and as a last resort to addressing the economic crisis facing Cuba following the Soviet withdrawal would indicate that he too recognizes the inherent danger to his regime that this phenomenon may hold.

Indeed, the entire effort to "demonize" Castro has backfired and served to further distance the United States from the international community. The image of the seemingly insignificant Caribbean leader of eleven million people that has been able to absorb a significant amount of the attention, albeit negative, of the neighborhood superpower has endowed Castro with a certain aura of fascination. Even in developing countries where he held little ideological sway, the image of the cigar-chomping Latino in green fatigues that could so readily give the Americans fits proved appealing to many of the haves as well as the have-nots. At Nelson Mandela's 1994 inauguration, when surrounded by throngs of press and autograph-seekers Castro was asked to what did he attribute the enduring and seemingly insatiable fascination with him as an international personality. He responded by pointing to the American delegation (led by Vice President Gore) and simply stated "I owe everything in this regard to the Americans."

COST OF LIMITING U.S. ENGAGEMENT ON TRANSNATIONAL ISSUES

Given Cuba's proximity to the United States, numerous transnational issues could usefully be addressed were the relationship less hostile. There are credible reports that Cuba serves as a transshipment point in the international narcotics trade. In light of Cuba's difficult economic circumstances, this should surprise no one. The phenomenon of illegal migration to the U.S. of Chinese and others via Cuba has increased in recent years. However, we lack open channels of communication within which to fruitfully discuss these and other issues of mutual and international concern.

The Cuban Government, reportedly with the assistance of an international consortium of Russian, British, Brazilian, German and Italian investors, is planning to complete construction of the Russian-designed nuclear power plant at Juragua. U.S. concerns about the quality of the plant's construction and Cuba's ability to safely operate it have been raised as the plant could threaten other Caribbean countries and the United States. Due to the state of its relations with Cuba, however, the United States is unable to effectively influence the development of this project. 11

The one area in which the two sides have constructively and regularly engaged over the past two decades has been that of migration of Cubans to the United States. With the May 1995 "secret agreement" negotiated between Cuban National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcon and Under Secretary of State Peter Tarnoff, under which the U.S. accepts a minimum of 20,000 migrants per year through legal immigration channels, but returns all but a very few of those who seek to reach U.S. shores through irregular means, the United States tacitly admitted that Cubans are no different from Haitians, Chinese or any other nationality group where the primary motivation is economic. With this major reversal in long-standing U.S. policy of accepting any Cuban as a political refugee not because of his/her individual circumstances but because of the nature of the regime, the United States tacitly recognized that, at least insofar as migrants were concerned, Cuba wasn't so different after all. Castro recognizes that this is an area where, by simply signaling to his people that Cuba's shoreline is no longer being patrolled, he can inflict considerable damage on the United States. Given the depths to which the bilateral relationship has fallen since the February 1996 shoot down of the two "Brothers to the Rescue" planes, it is somewhat remarkable that the May 1995 migration agreement between the two countries has remained essentially intact. There is, however, little enforcement leverage available to the U.S. - short of military force - should Castro decide to abrogate the agreement.

COST TO THE U.S. OF A VIOLENT TRANSITION IN CUBA

For political, moral and economic reasons, the United States would like to see the end of the Castro regime, but for the same reasons, a prolonged period of violence and instability would be disastrous. A Cuban civil war -- a live possibility, given the immense quantities of arms on the island and in Florida -- would inevitably involve American citizens of Cuban origin, would set off tsunamis of immigration, and would create a situation in which American intervention would be difficult to avoid. 12

Current U.S. policy toward Cuba, while directed at the Castro regime, has a decidedly negative impact on the quality of life of the average Cuban. Even among Cuban human rights activists, the embargo is decried as at best ineffective and at worst instrumental in keeping Castro in power. Most average Cubans recognize the failings of the centrally planned economy, but still believe that the revolution did achieve significant improvements in education, public health and income distribution. They view U.S. policy as reflecting the interests of those who have waited out the revolution in the comfort of their Miami mansions. They do not wish to see them return with "solutions" which they believe would seek to reinstate the rigidly divided class structure which was destroyed in the early years of the revolution.

The United States should be identified with those forces which seek constructive dialogue with those in power as well as those who may assume leadership roles in Cuba in the future. The U.S. should not be identified with contributing to a deteriorating standard of living for 11 million Cubans because we wish to see Fidel Castro out of power. Castro is not the issue; our stated policy of engagement and enlargement should be able to take us beyond him to the Cuban people with whom we have no quarrel.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear that the United States needs to adopt more realistic policies vis a vis Cuba that take into account dramatic changes in the international political and economic

landscape. Increasing contacts between Cubans and Americans on a variety of levels should be an immediate goal of a revised U.S. policy. The recently-approved opening of American media bureaus beginning with CNN is a useful beginning. Eliminating the restrictions on American citizen travel to Cuba would be another logical step in this process.

Within the hemisphere, the United States should signal its willingness to begin a dialogue with Cuba - in partnership with other countries in the region. A logical place to begin would be prior to the March 1998 "Summit of the Americas II" in Santiago" with the U.S. removing its objection to including the Cuban leadership in the event.

Since under Helms - Burton adjustments in other significant aspects of the bilateral relationship - such as the embargo - require an act of Congress, any Administration will face difficulty advancing this process very far. One way to begin, however, would be to engage those influential members of Congress on both sides of the aisle who are on record as favoring a new approach to Cuba in a dialogue to determine what initial steps might usefully be taken to begin a gradual process of detente with the Cuban regime. This will take some political courage and initiative - two commodities which are generally believed to be in more plentiful supply in the second term of an Administration.

ENDNOTES

- 1 "A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement", The White House, February 1996.
- 2 Washington Post, March 15, 1997.
- 3 William Raspberry, "Our Cuban Obsession", Washington Post, February 27, 1997.
- 4 Walter Russell Read, "Mutually Assured Stupidity", The New Yorker, March 11, 1996.
- 5 Raspberry.
- 6 Pamela S. Falk, "Eyes on Cuba", Foreign Affairs, March/April, 1996.
- 7 Falk.
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- 11 Mark P. Sullivan, "Cuba: Issues for Congress," CRS Report, December 2, 1996.
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Award*

*“Engagement and Enlargement: Why Not
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